

Homeless Shelter Workers in Midwestern Urban Centers

Archie Green Fellows Project AFC2016034

Oral History of Tracey Blackburn, Diversion Coordinator with Catholic Charities, Chicago, Illinois Conducted on October 20, 2016

Summary of Interview

Tracey Blackburn works as a Diversion Coordinator for Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago. Her work takes place at the Department of Family and Support Services located at the Garfield Community Service Center, 10 South Kedzie Avenue, Chicago, Illinois, 60624. Her job responsibilities include assisting families who are seeking shelter to connect with resources that may prevent them from entering the shelter system.

This interview took place in a meeting room at the Garfield Community Service Center, 10 South Kedzie Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Interview Log

- 00:00:01 Introduction
- 00:00:15 Tracey's job title: Diversion Coordinator; she works with clients coming for shelter and tries to find solutions to prevent them from having to enter the shelter system; also completes intakes for shelter placements when no other alternative can be found. To access city-funded shelters, a referral is required;
- 00:01:16 To access city-funded shelters, people must have a referral from a location such as hers, and these shelters call her location 3 times/day to advise if they have openings. Of the city-funded shelters there are:
- 15 shelters for families;
 - 7 shelters for single women;
 - 6 shelters for single men;
- To stay at private (non-city-funded) shelters, clients can walk in without referral;
- 00:02:20 Shelters are over-capacity this time of year (October) due to:
- impending colder weather when people might otherwise stay outside;
 - "eviction season" (which is her phrase) because landlords cannot evict people during severe weather so many hurry to evict right before winter;
 - the start of the school year when families want to be stable and have their kids in school so they are looking for housing resources;
- Prior to trying to accessing shelter, many families move house-to-house with friends and family;
- 00:03:59 When shelters are at capacity, families stay here at Garfield Center "overflow"; (can fit up to 170 people); if Garfield Center is full, people are sent to Salvation Army;

- 00:04:42 How Tracey came to do this work; has a background in social work; started here as an Outreach Worker doing:
- shelter placement;
 - transporting people from police stations & hospitals to shelter;
 - senior well-being checks;
 - crisis referrals through 3-1-1 call center;
- With a high number of people seeking shelter, she was hired for a pilot program, to divert people from shelter by finding other options for them; successful pilot led to current full-time position; assumption by people that shelter is the only way to connect with resources for housing; used to be easier to connect with housing before funding cuts, long Section 8 waiting list;
- 00:08:00 Description of the mobile outreach process: anyone who needs shelter can go to any police station or hospital where they will call 3-1-1 or the central referral system and a transportation teams will pick the person(s) up and transport them to a shelter that has room; there are four transportation teams, each with an area of town; teams also do “drive-bys” to see if they find people in need;
- 00:10:05 Regarding people camping outside; mobile outreach can offer a crisis referral, and tell them of their options, but most often people outside refuse shelter; Homeless Outreach Prevention (HOP) then connects with them;
- 00:11:26 How does diversion work? Clients must come in in person and meet with Tracey; she does a diversion assessment to learn reasons for seeking shelter. Story about client with Section 8 voucher, evicted due to an unpermitted guest; Tracey looks for any alternative to shelter: family, friends, help staying where they are, finding new housing, etc.;
- 00:14:28 Common reasons for loss of housing: evictions, living house to house, burned bridges with families, loss of jobs/income. Story about client with two kids, living with her mother;
- 00:16:25 Generational poverty; Story of family members, grandma, mother, and daughter each went through shelter system to get housing;
- 00:17:00 New Hope Apartments, a Catholic Charities program that provides case management and housing;
- 00:18:04 Rent for a 3 bedroom could be \$800-\$900, but are rare;
- 00:18:30 Description of the Rapid ReHousing program; rent subsidy;
- 00:19:35 Number of families she sees; about 15 families per day during a busy time; about 30 percent can be diverted from shelter;
- 00:21:28 How learned to do job? Assessments taught her to get to the real reason for seeking shelter; there is no one size fit all problem or solution;
- 00:24:43 How overflow shelter works on her site; cots and; roll-call, rules about hygiene, meals; clients arriving overnight;
- 00:25:55 School-aged children and school attendance; bus cards, public school across street;
- 00:27:24 Skills she brings to her job: patience, compassion, listening, thinking outside box, knowledge of shelter placement process & available resources in community; story of an example of thinking outside box to find a good solution for someone;

00:32:01 Discussion of why people would refuse shelter; living under viaducts, in parks; some have an income; day program at her site (Franciscan House day program);

00:33:58 Challenges of her work: used to wonder about people's outcomes; running into dead ends with a motivated client, or a non-motivated client living assistance; story of a mom receiving TANF [Temporary Aid to Needy Families] \$347/month and food stamps for \$300; challenged by seeing the children suffering; story about children being teased about having lint in their hair from the shelter blankets;

00:36:51 Rewarding parts of her work: a family return to thank; giving people a sense of hope every day;

00:37:50 Impact of external events: severe weather is a big factor in the number of clients;

00:38:39 Her work has made her more humble; clients from all walks of life; story of a former alderman seeking shelter;

00:41:20 Discussion of the future of homelessness; suggestion that all shelters incorporate diversion; has participated in the Chicago Plan to End Homelessness; that is the city's funding stream for her program;

00:42:31 Systemic solutions; lack of affordable housing is a major problem;

00:44:38 Advice to someone new to her work? Conduct conversational based assessments; no two families are the same; take care of yourself; Tracey has a 150-page resource book she made; set aside your own beliefs; story about a family wanting to home-school their children;

00:47:41 How Chicago organizations work together; clients looking for shelter most likely have three or more issues behind that that they need to deal with to gain stability;

00:48:40 Discussion of quarterly round table with partner organizations, Chicago Housing Authority, HUD [Housing and Urban Development]; grappling with HMIS and putting youth in categories;

00:51:50 End